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Disruptive Forces in Kaingáng Society

182 571 THE VERY FORMLESSNESS OF KAINGÁNG society makes us wonder what gave it coherence. There were no territorial boundaries to limit the range of the hunter, there was no chief or government to impose its will on the people, there were no binding marriage forms and incest restrictions were minimal. Marriage was brittle, and even the polyandrous and joint households, by far the most stable units in the society, included only 20 percent of the married population. Men were torn between the ties of blood and the ties of marriage; they spent their years fluctuating between groups of both kinds and haunted by a sense of insecurity.

619 182 571 578 The mechanism of kinship did not enforce cooperation among specific individuals, and there was no large unit of specific outline that might accomplish coordination of effort in some other way. The cooperation among in-laws might be broken almost without reproach, and the ties that bound children to their parents or to one another yielded to the strain of affinal relationships or to stronger bonds that grew up between men and their hunting companions. Yet, with all this, Kaingáng society could have held together, however haphazardly its bonds are slung, for the Kaingáng have a strong sense of being one people against other people. After all, they are all related to one another by blood, and they are all "*our* people" or "*our* living things" to one another, as opposed to all other "living things" that have no possessive pronoun to bring them within the group. They felt the need for renewing ever and again their informal contacts, and whoever let the years pass as he lived in isolation wandering thoughtlessly in a distant part of the forest risked a quarrel when he met again the people he had neglected. The very lack of fixity of relationships and the multitude of ways of forming them left the Kaingáng with no device for controlling a

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conflict. Once a feud arose there was nothing, neither dominating ties of blood nor the voice of chieftainship or government, to stop or limit it. Where the demands of kin by marriage conflicted with the claims of blood and where the call of a hunting companion whose bed one had shared clamored above the voices of blood and affinity the individual was pulled in a dozen directions, by a dozen magnets. Feuds spread, cleaving the society asunder like a deadly axe, blighting its life like the plague. Thus it came about that the very forces of integration carried the seeds of disruption within them. A man's link with his wife's people pulled him from his siblings; his bond with his sister's husband tore him from his wife's people; and his relationships with his hunting companions drew him from all.

The Kaingáng are divided into extended families ranging in numbers from 50 to 300 individuals. These families are made up of the descendants of two or more men who have intermarried and whose children have intermarried. Thus each family is closely inbred, and almost every member can trace his genealogy[1] to one of the two or more male ancestors. These ancestral males are real personalities, and the data on them is usually rather full, but there is always a point beyond which memory cannot go, and it is impossible to learn anything about any of their parents or siblings. Marriages with other extended families occurred, but marriages within the families far outnumber marriages between the families. This endogamy was brought about not by a specific taboo on marrying outside but by the hostility between the families which made them distrust one another and which kept them apart. When members of different families did marry it almost always caused a split in the ranks of one or both of the intermarrying groups. In such a case brother might be aligned against brother to the death. Those who shifted from one family to another either through marriage or through having been captured as youngsters were looked on as blood relatives of their new associates and hence as enemies to their former friends and were given no quarter in case of attack by members of the family to which they once belonged.

The Kaingáng call members of their own extended family "my own people," and the warm personal relationships that have been described in the preceding chapters exist only among one's "own people." For hundreds of years there have been several Kaingáng extended families and they have lived in a state of perpetual feud with one another. Whole lineages have been destroyed, and others, overcome by panic, have wandered away into the endless forests, never to be heard of again. Sometimes two extended families have come together and have been able to live in peace, but gen-

[1] The Kaingáng are minutely interested in their own genealogies, and they know who their father's father's father's son's wife's sister's daughter's husband is down to the last detail of all his names, what he died of, and how many children he had.

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since he had clubbed the deer he should have the skin. But when I went to hand it to him, Ndíli said, "I want the skin," to which Dung replied, "He wants it; so give it to him." The willingness to yield to aggressiveness, coupled with the indifference to trouble unless it faces one squarely, operates to reduce enormously the number and severity of conflicts within the extended family.

The obsessive interest of the Kaingáng in destruction and murder was all externalized against the "other people," and it was this ability to externalize their obsession that was in part responsible for whatever coherence and security the families preserved. The overpowering urge toward destruction that manifests itself still in the wanton gashing of trees and the killing of the tiniest bird that happens to perch on a limb where stick or stone may reach it is never directed inward against the family but always outward. The function of the feuds, therefore, was twofold, for they served both to gratify the need to destroy and to direct it away from the extended family; and this duality contributed to their perpetuation.

The overwhelming bulk of Kaingáng folklore is murder stories—murder committed in every imaginable way and on all relatives except sons. Stories begin with murders committed for no reason and rehearse over and over again the whole wearisome theme of treachery and retaliation. The interest in the feuds has suffocated any other mythological theme, and instead of the elaborate variations on widespread mythological elements that are so common among many primitive peoples we find that when these elements actually do appear in Kaingáng folklore they are bare, fossilized, neglected plots which the literary imagination has never developed. The one elaborate art form that the Kaingáng have, their folklore, is overwhelmingly concerned with their own destruction.

Perhaps the best proof of the obsessive nature of this trait lies in a split within an extended family which occurred after the Kaingáng were localized on the reservation and which culminated in the murder of Thechá. For years the Kaingáng had committed no murder. Their vendetta enemies had been killed or driven far away, and now the group that had lived in harmony for generations was isolated from the dangers of attack and settled peacefully on the reservation. But Thechá took to saying that he wasn't afraid of anyone, and he was angry at everyone; so "since he was angry with them they became angry with him." They decided to kill him, and one of the plotters was his own first cousin, his father's sister's son, Kovĺ. Now Thechá was a most unusual Kaingáng, for he could not swim. That simplified matters, and one day when he was crossing the river with a number of people—"nine people and five women," as one informant put it—"the canoe tipped over." Nobody tipped it, for such baldness of statement would offend Kaingáng good taste, but "the canoe tipped over" and